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Dropping out from apprenticeship training as an opportunity for change

Schmid, Evi ; Stalder, Barbara E

Abstract: In recent years, the VET systems in Germany and Switzerland have been characterised by a shortage of training places which has created a fierce competition for those places among candidates. Nowadays, in Switzerland, almost one out of three school-leaving VET applicants has to wait at least 1 year until he or she secures a suitable place of apprenticeship. Furthermore, the dropout rate in apprenticeships is quite high and challenges educational policy. About one in five apprenticeship contracts is terminated without the apprentice having achieved the aspired degree on the secondary level. Dropping out of vocational education puts youths at great risk of not gaining re-entry into upper secondary education and staying without a secondary level degree. A Swiss survey following circa 1,300 young persons 3 years after dropping out of apprenticeship training shows that three-quarters of the dropouts continued their education within these three years. Although the time around the drop out had been a strain for these young people, most of the 'education returners' are more satisfied with their new education than before dropping out. These findings suggest that dropping out of education is not bad per se and should not be avoided in every case. Dropping out can also provide an opportunity to solve problems concerning one's education, to improve one's educational situation and to realign. After having changed to another company, another educational level or another field, around two-thirds tend to finish their vocational education. Nonetheless, for one-third of youths dropping out of education represents the end of any education on the upper secondary level. The aim of this chapter is to follow the life courses of dropouts, to describe the educational situation they are in during the first 3 years after dropping out of their apprenticeship training and to discuss in what way dropping out may represent an opportunity for change.

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Chapter 8

Dropping Out from Apprenticeship Training as an Opportunity for Change

Evi Schmid and Barbara E. Stalder

Introduction

Dropping out of education is usually seen as a risk factor: Dropouts are at risk of remaining without any educational qualifications, of unemployment, poverty and health problems. Dropping out is therefore usually just seen as negative event in an adolescent's educational career. In this chapter, we will argue for a more discerning perspective, which focuses on the positive aspects of dropout: Dropping out from vocational education and training can be seen as an opportunity for change and as a means to improve the educational situation. The dropout phenomenon has so far hardly been investigated from this perspective. Especially in English-speaking countries, dropouts are normally just investigated from a risk perspective (e.g. Alexander, Entwistle, & Horsey, 1997; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000). In German-speaking countries, educational dropouts and change of apprenticeship position (with an early termination of an apprenticeship contract) are widely discussed by politicians and practitioners. Research in this area, however, is still rare. More specifically, only few studies have analysed the consequences of such terminations in depth (Bohlinger, 2002b; Schöngen, 2003).

The early termination of an apprenticeship contract can be considered as a non-normative stressful life event which requires specific actions and coping strategies (Schmid, 2010). According to developmental psychology, stressful life events can

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threaten an individual's social, physical and mental well-being. A stressful life event is thus a risk factor in many ways. However, stressful life events do not only threaten the health and well-being of the persons concerned, but they can also represent a chance for a new start and thus for change and personal development (Filipp, 1995).

Based on the longitudinal survey LEVA (*Lehrvertragsauflösungen im Kanton Bern*, Schmid & Stalder, 2008; Stalder & Schmid, 2008), we will discuss two indicators for successful coping of early terminations of apprenticeship contracts: re-entry into upper secondary education and satisfaction with the new education. Both can be defined as criteria of effective coping with this stressful life event. First, we will analyse the consequences of the early contract terminations for the subsequent educational pathway by looking at four types of dropping out of apprenticeship training: inter-organisational change, downgrading or upgrading, occupational change and dropping out without re-entry. Second, we will analyse changes in educational satisfaction by contrasting the situation before and after the contract termination.

Considering the importance of the educational context for educational pathways as well as for dropouts and change, we will start by outlining the major characteristics of the Swiss apprenticeship system.

Vocational Education and Training in Switzerland

In Switzerland, vocational education and training is the predominant form of upper secondary education (grades 10 to 12/13/14; age 16+). More than two-thirds of school leavers enrol in VET¹ programmes. The majority enters apprenticeships, which are offered in more than 250 occupations in industry, trades, commerce, domestic service, agriculture and the health sector (OPET, 2009). For low-achieving school leavers, apprenticeship-based training is the only option to gain an upper secondary certificate. For higher-achieving youth, there are more possibilities, including apprenticeships as well as purely school-based VET programmes.

Like other dual systems, the Swiss apprenticeship system is characterised by a close link between vocational education and training and the employment market (Gonon, 2002). The VET curriculum and the certification system are vocation-bound, permeability between occupations is low and pathways from vocational education to employment are highly standardised. Apprentices have a double status: They are not yet 'full' workers but no longer 'pure' students. Three to four days a week, apprentices are trained in a training company, where they participate in real production processes and earn a modest wage. One to two days a week, they are students in vocational schools (Wettstein & Gonon, 2009).

¹VET = vocational education and training

In Switzerland, apprenticeships can be completed on two different qualification levels: short apprenticeships of 2 years on the one hand and 3- or 4-year apprenticeships on the other. The latter enable young people to start skilled work and – after some years of work experience – to enter higher vocational training in the non-academic branch of tertiary education. Three- to four-year apprenticeships can also be combined with vocational matura qualifications, which permit access to the universities of applied science. Short apprenticeships of 2 years are intellectually less demanding and addressed to the ‘more practically gifted young people’. At the end of a short apprenticeship, young people are enabled to start qualified work or to take up a 3- or 4-year apprenticeship in the same vocational field.

The training companies are responsible for the recruitment and selection of their apprentices and for the practical training during the apprenticeship. Most of the companies select their apprentices on the basis of an application interview, on the general impression they gain during a brief trial apprenticeship (*Schnupperlehre*) before the actual apprenticeship and/or on results of an entry test (Imdorf, 2007; Stalder, 2000). The relationship between employer and apprentice is regulated by a specific work contract that states the form and duration of the apprenticeship, the salary, the working hours and the vacations. The contract is limited to the duration of the apprenticeship (2–4 years) and can only be changed or terminated early with extraordinary reason by the apprentice or the employer. One of the specific features of the apprenticeship contract is that vocational schools, although strongly involved in vocational education and training, are no contract partner and can merely advise on contract changes or cancellations. It is the sole responsibility of the apprenticeship trainer and the apprentice to decide whether or not to cancel the apprenticeship contract before its predefined end.

For a long time, the dual VET system has been regarded as one of the best ways to provide employers with the needed working force and to enable young people to smoothly and successfully enter upper secondary education and establish their pathway from education to employment (Dubs, 2006). From an international perspective, the relatively moderate range of youth unemployment in Switzerland (5–10%, Bertschy, Böni, & Meyer, 2008) has been seen as evidence for the success of the dual system. However, one of the crucial points dominating the current VET debate in Switzerland is the (mal)functioning of the apprenticeship market, that is, the subtle relationship between supply of and demand for apprenticeship places (Dubs, 2006; Meyer, 2009; OPET, 2009). More than 20% of all young people in Switzerland do not manage to directly enter upper secondary education (Hupka-Brunner, Sacchi, & Stalder, 2010; Imdorf, 2005). Most of them first have to enrol in one-year educational programmes, so-called bridging courses, to improve their skills and increase their chances to gain access to an apprenticeship place. This situation results in a competition amongst applicants for VET places, where especially the socially ‘weak’ youth find it hard to compete: Young people from a family with low socioeconomic status, with a migrant background and with low reading or mathematical literacy skills are significantly more often disadvantaged when trying to gain access to upper secondary education (Hupka-Brunner et al., 2010; Imdorf, 2005). However, it is not just the transition from compulsory school to apprenticeship training but also the pathways

throughout the apprenticeship until graduation which is far from smooth and easy for many young people (Stalder, 2009; Stalder, Meyer, & Hupka-Brunner, 2008): Up to 30% of all apprentices in Switzerland do not finish their first apprenticeship within the given terms of the contract, but change the occupation or the training firm, repeat a year, quit or drop out of the apprenticeship without an immediate alternative in education (Stalder). Dropping out and unplanned educational changes are related to various risk factors, such as poor educational achievement in lower secondary and vocational school, problematic occupational and organisational choices, health and other personal problems or poor training conditions in the training firms (Bohlinger, 2002a; Hunger, Jenewein, & Sanfleber, 2002). Especially dropping out of an apprenticeship seems to involve a multiple risk situation. Socially disadvantaged backgrounds, stressful life events (moving out from home, childbirth etc.), apprenticeships with unfavourable learning and work conditions and poor achievement in vocational school seem to cumulate and to favour early contract terminations without immediate re-entry into education (Stalder). In summary, although a smooth transition from education to work has long been taken for granted, it is neither quick nor easy for a considerable number of young people.

The Stressful Life Event ‘Early Apprenticeship Contract Termination’

The early termination of an apprenticeship contract marks a critical transition in a youth's educational pathway. It causes the risk of not being able to re-enter upper secondary education and of staying without any upper secondary level degree. Nowadays, a diploma on the upper secondary level is considered as the ‘minimum for successfully entering the labour market and a basis for further participation in lifelong learning’ (OECD, 2005, p. 3). Without such a degree, young people are at risk of not being able to find employment (e.g. Bertschy et al., 2008; Descy, 2002) or of only being able to work under precarious conditions (Ecoplan, 2003). They thus run the risk of becoming socio-economically disadvantaged and of being forced to live on public welfare (BFS, 2007a, 2007b). An early apprenticeship contract termination can thus be considered as non-normative stressful life event which asks for specific actions and coping strategies.

In psychological stress research, it is assumed that a stressful life event has been coped with successfully if the person concerned is physically and mentally healthy (or healthy *again*). The effectiveness of coping is reflected in ‘functioning in work and social living, morale or life satisfaction, and somatic health’ (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 181). The social, physical and mental well-being is therefore seen as ‘criterion of effectiveness’ (author's translation, Filipp, 1995; Weber, 1994). Typically, the effectiveness of coping is measured by indicators of health and well-being (e.g. depression, self-esteem, subjective well-being).

Being affected by a stressful life event is mostly seen negatively: The persons concerned are somehow socially, physically or mentally damaged and have to cope

with this situation. In order to recover, they have to try and ‘solve the problem’, that is, to restore health and well-being. In contrast to this traditional clinical psychological perspective, a developmental psychological perspective does not consider stressful life events just as a cause for illness, depression, loneliness and other life problems. As developmental psychology shows, stressful life events do not merely bear risks but also offer opportunities for change. In other words, they also have a positive potential (Filipp, 1995).

Research Question

In this article, two possible consequences of early apprenticeship contract terminations are investigated: re-entry into upper secondary education and satisfaction with the new education. First, we analyse the consequences of the early contract terminations for the following educational pathway by looking at four types of dropping out of apprenticeship training: inter-organisational change, downgrading or upgrading, occupational change and dropping out without re-entry. Second, we analyse changes in educational satisfaction by contrasting the situation before and after the contract termination. Accordingly, we ask whether an early apprenticeship contract termination is not just a risk for the young people but can also be seen as a successful method to cope with educational problems – provided that an improvement in educational satisfaction can be found.

The re-entry and the educational satisfaction are thus defined as criteria to measure the effectiveness of the coping process after an early apprenticeship contract termination.

Method

The survey is based on a three-wave longitudinal study with 1,321 young persons in the Swiss Canton of Bern (LEVA – *Lehrvertragsauflösungen im Kanton Bern*). The sample comprises 548 women (42%) and 773 men (59%), 1,149 Swiss youth (87%) and 172 with other nationality (13%). The first wave was carried out in 2004, shortly after the termination of the apprenticeship contract, the second one in spring 2005 and the last one in spring 2007. Data collected included characteristics of the apprenticeship contract termination (wave 1), educational satisfaction before (wave 1) and after contract termination (wave 2) and detailed monthly information about educational and occupational activities and programmes the young persons had been enrolled in since dropping out, such as re-entry into a full-time upper secondary programme, employment, unemployment or bridging courses (*Brückenangebot*) (wave 3). Response rates ranged between 67% and 87% (Schmid & Stalder, 2008; Stalder & Schmid, 2008).

In the context of this study, *re-entry* was defined as re-entry into education at the upper secondary level. This definition comprises all apprenticeships of 2, 3

or 4 years, school-based VET programmes, high schools and other educational programmes which lead to an upper secondary level certificate. Bridging courses do not lead to a secondary level degree and are therefore not regarded as re-entry.

Educational satisfaction was captured with three scales: *general satisfaction with education*, *opportunities for learning* and *workload in the apprenticeship company*.

General satisfaction with education was measured with three items adapted from Baillod and Semmer (1994). The scale comprises items like 'Hopefully, my educational situation remains as it is'. A 7-point scale was used, from 1, 'nearly never', to 7, 'nearly always' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$, based on 1,166 observations of wave 1, and Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$, based on 413 observations of wave 2).

Opportunities for learning in the company were measured with three items which were adapted from the variability scale of the Short Questionnaire for Job Analysis (Prümper, Hartmannsgruber, & Frese, 1995). One example is 'At work, I can learn a lot of new things'. A 5-point scale was used, from 1, 'very seldom/never', to 5, 'very often/always' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$, based on 1,268 observations of wave 1, and Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$, based on 372 observations of wave 2).

Workload was measured with five items adapted from Prümper et al. (1995). The scale assesses complexity and difficulty (e.g. 'I have to accomplish difficult tasks which I have not yet learned') as well as time pressure (e.g. 'I have too much to do'). A 5-point scale was used, from 1, 'nearly never', to 5, 'nearly always' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$, based on 1,242 observations of wave 1, and Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$, based on 367 observations of wave 2).

In addition, the statistics on educational contracts in the Canton of Bern (which includes every apprenticeship contract in the Canton) was analysed, and rates of apprenticeship contract terminations were calculated.

Results

Descriptive Results: Rate of Early Apprenticeship Contract Terminations

In the Canton of Bern, about one out of five apprenticeship contracts is terminated early, that is, before the apprentice has achieved the aspired degree at the upper secondary level. Contrary to what might be expected, the rate of contract terminations has not increased during the last 10 years but has been quite stable (see Fig. 8.1). However, the differences between occupational fields are huge: especially in the field of hotel and restaurant industry, in retail business, in the construction field or in hairdressing, the rates of contract terminations are above 30%. Contrary, in occupations like commercial employee, architectural draftsman, gardener or medical assistant, contract termination rates are below 20%. Regardless of the occupational field, occupations with low intellectual requirements have considerably

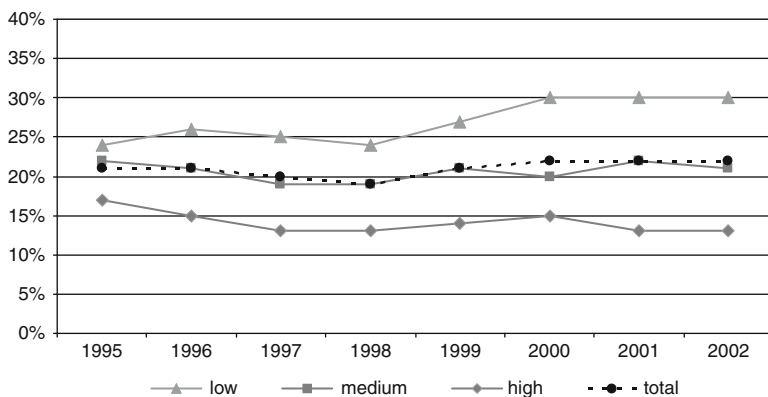


Fig. 8.1 Rate of apprenticeship contract terminations by requirements

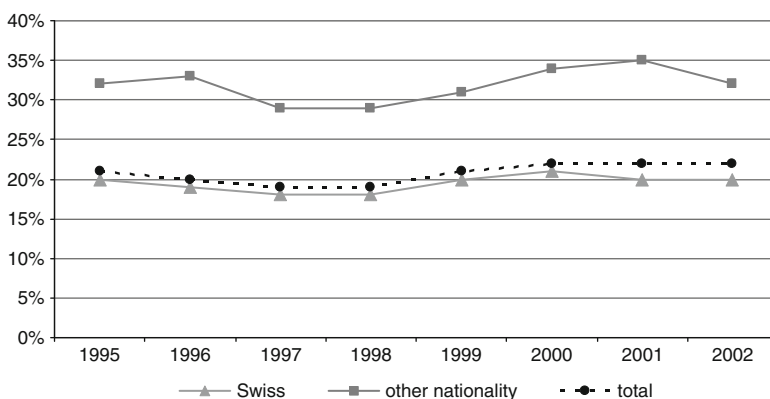


Fig. 8.2 Rate of apprenticeship contract terminations by nationality

higher termination rates than occupations with medium or high requirements (see Fig. 8.1). Furthermore, young people with other nationalities than Swiss are especially at risk: Whilst one out of five apprenticeship contracts of Swiss apprentices is terminated, this rate amounts to roughly one out of three for foreign apprentices (see Fig. 8.2). Regardless of the occupation, the rate of contract terminations of foreign youth is thus much higher than the one of Swiss youth (for more details, see Stalder & Schmid, 2006).

Re-entry and Type of Re-entry

Based on monthly records with information about the educational situation of the young people since their dropping out of the apprenticeship, a re-entry curve was drawn.

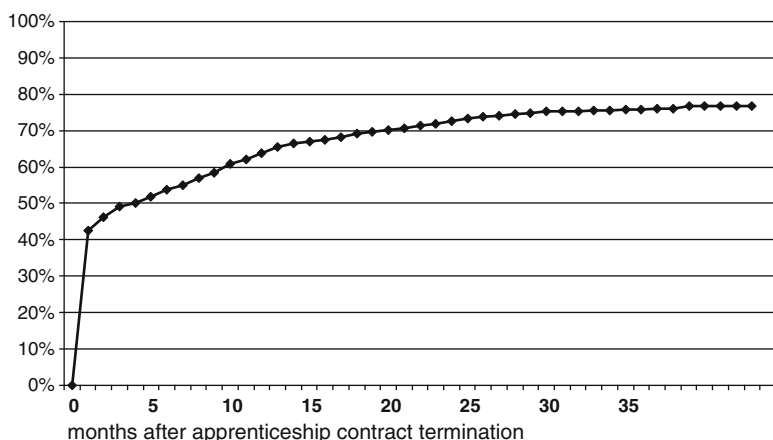


Fig. 8.3 Time of re-entry into upper secondary education, in months after apprenticeship contract termination, cumulative percents ($N=1,321$)

The results show that more than 40% of the young people continue their education already in the first month after contract termination (see Fig. 8.3). One year later, about 60% and, 2 years later, more than 70% of the young people had re-entered upper secondary education. Three years after the apprenticeship contract termination, about three-quarters of the young people had re-entered the educational system. Still, this also means that one-quarter had been without any new education three years after dropping out.

The chance to re-enter upper secondary education is especially high shortly after dropping out: More than half of the young people who managed to re-enter education did so in the first month after the contract termination. Yet from the second month on, it starts to get more and more difficult to find a new educational place. The number of young people starting with a new education after a break of 2 years or more is very small: Those who do not find a possibility to re-enter upper secondary education within 2 years are very unlikely to re-enter into such an education at all (for more details, see Schmid, 2010).

What kind of educational programme do young people choose after dropping out of apprenticeship training? It seems useful to distinguish between four main ‘drop-out types’ (see also Stalder, 2009):

- **Inter-organisational change:** After the contract termination, the apprentices move to another company to continue their apprenticeship in the same occupation. They thus do not have to start a new education.
- **Downgrading or upgrading:** The apprentices change to an apprenticeship with higher or lower intellectual requirements within the same occupational field. A new contract is issued. The young people thus do not have to start a totally new education. Besides, most of them can even stay in the same company.

Table 8.1 ‘Dropout types’ at three different points in time: 1, 12 and 24 months after apprenticeship contract termination; percentages ($N=1,321$)

	Number of young people in% ... months after contract termination		
	1st month	12th month	24th month
<i>With re-entry</i>	42%	65%	72%
Inter-organisational change	18%	26%	26%
Downgrading or upgrading	22%	23%	23%
Occupational change	3%	15%	22%
<i>No re-entry: Dropout</i>	58%	36%	28%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%

Due to rounding the sum is not always 100%

- Occupational change: The apprentices quit their apprenticeship and start a new one in another occupational field or with a school-based programme. Most of them also (have to) change to another company.
- Dropping out without re-entry: The apprentices quit their apprenticeship without continuing vocational training or entering another education within the observed period of time (2–3 years).

Table 8.1 shows the number of young people with inter-organisational change, downgrading or upgrading, occupational change and dropping out without re-entry in the first, 12th and 24th month after the apprenticeship contract termination. The majority of those who re-enter already in the first month after dropping out change to an apprenticeship with higher or lower intellectual requirements within the same occupational field (*downgrading* or *upgrading*) or move to another company (*inter-organisational change*). Both groups do not start a totally new education but continue their apprenticeship in another company or on another intellectual level. There are only few who change into another occupational field shortly after having dropped out.

One year after the contract termination, almost two thirds have re-entered upper secondary education, and after 2 years, this rate amounts to almost three-quarters. Between this first and second year, it is especially the number of occupational changers that has increased: Young people who change to another occupational field or start with a school-based programme mostly do so only a few months after dropping out. They first need some time to think about their new plans and to find a new educational place. Besides, they have to wait for the beginning of the new school year in summer. Contrary to the occupational changers, inter-organisational changers as well as downgraders or upgraders mostly continue their education shortly after contract termination.

In sum, 2 years after contract termination, there are 26% of young people with inter-organisational change, 23% with downgrading or upgrading and 22% with occupational change, whilst 28% are still without re-entry: They have not continued their education, neither in another company or on another intellectual level

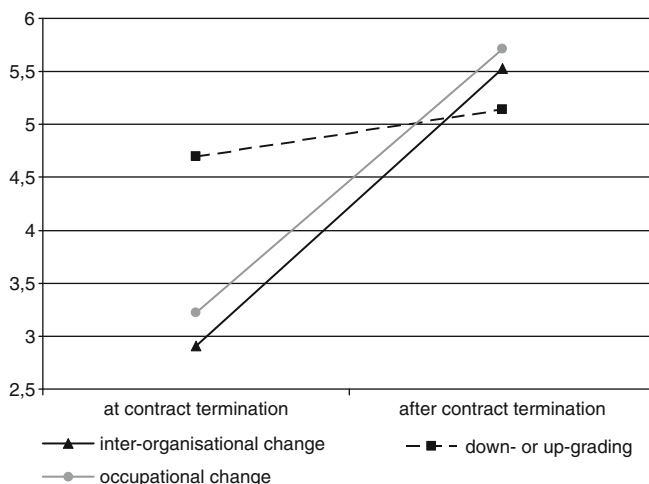


Fig. 8.4 General educational satisfaction before and after apprenticeship contract termination; means ($N=246$). Scale from 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always). N inter-organisational change = 108; N down- or up-grading = 102; N occupational change = 36. mean differences measuring time: $p < .001$; groups: $p < .001$; interaction measuring time*groups: $p < .000$

nor in another occupational field or with a school-based upper secondary education. As can be gathered from the re-entry curve presented in Fig. 8.3, most of them will still be without re-entry 3 years after the apprenticeship contract termination.

Educational Satisfaction Before and After Contract Termination

The comparison of the general educational satisfaction before and after the apprenticeship contract termination is shown in Fig. 8.4. Satisfaction with the new education is, in general, significantly higher than with the previous apprenticeship. Especially occupational and inter-organisational changers are much more satisfied with their new education than with the old one. Downgraders and upgraders too are happier with their new education, though they had already been quite satisfied with their first education.

Furthermore, opportunities for learning in the company have in general increased significantly: Those who have re-entered another education are in general happier with their learning situation and with the way they can use their knowledge at work. In addition, the workload at the workplace has decreased compared to the first apprenticeship. All told, general educational satisfaction has increased, and the educational situation seems to have improved, at least for those who have re-entered the educational system.

Summary and Conclusion

Dropouts are in contradiction to the norm of linear pathways from education to work and thus to the intended institutional education structures (Raffe, 2008; Ryan, 2001). Therefore, dropouts are usually viewed out of a risk perspective, and only their negative consequences are focussed on. Based on a longitudinal study with more than 1,300 young people who have experienced an early apprenticeship contract termination, this article has looked at positive consequences of dropping out of an apprenticeship. First, we analysed the consequences of early contract terminations for the subsequent educational pathway by looking at four types of dropping out of apprenticeship training: inter-organisational change, down- or upgrading, occupational change and dropping out without re-entry. Second, we analysed changes in educational satisfaction by contrasting the situation before and after the contract termination. It was shown that roughly three-quarters of the young people continue with their education at the upper secondary level within 3 years after the contract termination. The majority of them already resume their education in the first month. In total, these young people are clearly happier with their new education than with the previous one. General educational satisfaction is significantly higher, and from the perspective of the young people, possibilities for learning at the workplace have improved whilst stress levels at work have decreased.

For these young people, the early apprenticeship contract termination has proved to be an opportunity for change and for a new start as well as a means for optimising their educational situation. The early termination of an apprenticeship contract is thus not always merely a risk factor and to be avoided at all costs. It can also be seen as a positive turning point in the pathway from education to work and thus as a possibility for optimising the choice of the training occupation and/or the training company. These findings suggest that quitting an apprenticeship training position may also provide an opportunity for a reorientation, to solve educational problems and to improve the educational situation.

Still, about one-quarter of the dropouts do not re-enter upper secondary education within three years. For those young people, the early apprenticeship contract termination may in fact represent the abandonment of education altogether and hence is connected to many risk factors and negative consequences such as a missing degree on the upper secondary level, unemployment, poverty and health problems. The termination of an apprenticeship contract can thus be seen as non-normative stressful life event in the school-to-work transition, which calls for adequate coping strategies. These results show the limits of the strongly work-based education system in Switzerland: Young people who drop out of and fail to re-enter apprenticeship training have hardly any alternatives to complete an upper secondary level education. It thus seems necessary to strengthen post-qualification possibilities at a later stage (e.g. during or after some years in employment).

When faced with the challenge to re-enter the educational system after dropping out of an apprenticeship, speed really is of the essence: The chances of re-entering decrease the longer the young people remain outside the educational system after

quitting the apprenticeship. Educational policy measures must therefore start early after the termination of the apprenticeship contract or better yet even before the termination of the contract.

In sum, we suggest that early apprenticeship contract terminations should not only be discussed from a risk perspective. It does not always mean that these young people drop out of education for good. In fact, most early apprenticeship contract terminations do not result in the complete abandonment of education but indeed in an improvement of the educational situation. It must consequently not be the aim of educational policy to avoid apprenticeship contract terminations at all costs, and it would be desirable if the respective public discourse was less pessimistic since this discourse may influence young people in making their occupational choices. Non-linear pathways from education to work have become 'normal' for many young people. Therefore, such pathways must be considered a social reality, and they are part of the transition into adulthood. Early apprenticeship contract terminations must thus not be seen as just a failure or a mistake, but also as an opportunity for change and a chance for personal development.

Nevertheless, for many youth, the re-entry into upper secondary education after quitting an apprenticeship is not easy at all. Many of them find another educational place only after several weeks or months. Others do not re-enter at all within the first years after dropping out. For these young people, an early apprenticeship contract termination is connected with a lot of difficulties and risks. In this situation, providing assistance and promoting re-entry must thus be a central issue in educational policy.

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